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Policing and drug market-related violence: competitive, internal and enforcement-related violence in UK County Lines

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ABSTRACT

Background: The link between drugs and violence has been widely studied across a range of academic disciplines, including criminology, sociology, psychology, and social policy. However, much of this scholarship has focused specifically on the United States, and the specific form of competitive violence between rival groups.
Objectives: This paper adds to the literature by focusing on County Lines drug markets in the United Kingdom (UK), which have been linked to increases in violence and the exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults for selling, storing or transporting illicit drugs. We utilise this case, as well as recent literature on harm reduction policing, to expand frameworks for thinking about drug market-related violence.
Methods: The analysis is based on the first national study of the policing of County Lines, which consisted of interviews with senior officers across 44 of the 45 territorial police forces in the UK, as well as additional interviews and observations in three case study areas with front-line officers, partner agencies and people with lived experiences (n=117).
Results: Our findings illustrate how the exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults could be conceptualised as an internal form of violence in County Lines in the UK. Furthermore, we highlight the need to acknowledge enforcement-related violence associated with the policing of drug markets.
Conclusions: Based on our empirical findings, we argue for a conceptual broadening of current understandings of drug market-related violence, as well as further developing harm reduction policing thinking and responses to effectively counteract all forms of violence associated with drug markets and their control.

Introduction

The County Lines drug market has been described as "the most violent model of drug supply" in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2025). It has been linked to elevated levels of violence traditionally associated with drug markets and newer forms of associated violence in the variable forms of child and adult exploitation. The term 'County Lines' refers to a specific distribution model in the United Kingdom (UK), mainly associated with the heroin and crack cocaine market, where gangs and organised crime groups, as well as smaller independents from major cities, began to operate in smaller towns and rural counties (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). This drug market has been strongly linked with two kinds of violence. Initially, it has been associated with the type of competitive violence normally associated with sellers moving into a new territory and then, latterly, with the criminal exploitation of vulnerable children and adults that are 'recruited' by those organising the activities, as a signature practice (NCA, 2019).

The link between drugs and violence has been studied for decades across a range of academic disciplines and in the drug policy literature (Goldstein, 1985), with many attempts at disentangling this complex relationship. However, much of this scholarship has built on work carried out in the United States (US), with some of the foundational studies and framings being developed specifically in the context of the "extraordinary violence" (Reuter, 2009, p. 281) associated with the late 1980s US crack market (Liem & Moeller, 2025). Furthermore, it has been argued that there has been a particular tendency to focus on

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competitive violence between rival groups (Reuter, 2009).

In order to explore DMRV in other forms and contexts, this paper draws on the first national study of the policing of County Lines in the UK. Based on interviews and observations with police officers, as well as interviews with people with lived experience, we address the central question of how DMRV is experienced and responded to in UK County Lines, with the aim of expanding current frameworks for thinking about drug market-related violence. Our findings point to the exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults as a prominent internal form of violence in County Lines drug markets. Furthermore, we highlight enforcement-related violence associated with the policing of drug markets. We argue for the need to situate internal as well as enforcement-related violence as central parts of DMRV, and for the need to further develop harm reduction policing thinking and responses to these forms of violence.

Drug market-related violence in the literature

The trade in controlled drugs is a major cause of violence around the world. Such violence is inextricably linked with the legal status of these drugs since market actors cannot rely on the state to resolve disputes (Reuter, 2009; Werb et al., 2011; Wilson & Stevens, 2008). However, drug markets are not necessarily violent and the vast majority of transactions tend to happen peacefully (Coomber, 2015, 2025; Johnson, 2016). Violence levels in drug markets depend on their history, culture and context, and while drug markets are often portrayed as extremely violent by the media and policy-makers, research has pointed to how market actors do not necessarily experience them in this way, and that they often will try to avoid and constrain violence (Coomber & Maher, 2006). Nevertheless, the lack of formal market regulation can still result in many forms of associated violence (Roberts & Chen, 2013). Our focus here is on violence associated with the final stages of the complex transnational industries that deliver substances primarily produced in South America and Central Asia to users in towns and cities in the UK.

Goldstein's (1985) seminal work on the drugs/violence nexus has laid the foundation for drug policy scholars trying to disentangle the relationship between illicit drugs and violence. Goldstein suggested a typology of three distinct forms of drug-related violence: 1) psychopharmacological, which relates to how certain substances may cause individuals to act aggressively and potentially violently when ingested, 2) economic compulsive, which refers to how people who use drugs may engage in acquisitive crime, potentially violently, in order to fund their habit, and finally 3) systemic, which refers to how violence links to the use, production and distribution of illicit drugs. Given the focus of this paper on DMRV, it is the latter form of 'systemic violence' that is the most relevant for us to consider. In Goldstein's (1985) original account, this form of violence included, for example, disputes over territory between rival dealers, assaults committed within dealing hierarchies, robbery of dealers and related retaliation for this, violence directed at informers, punishment directed at users for failing to pay their debts, punishment directed at sellers for selling adulterated or phony drugs, and disputes over drugs or drug paraphernalia. Given the wide array of violent activities that fall into this category, 'systemic violence' has since been criticized for being a 'kitchen sink' category, and there have been calls for more fine-grained analysis (Liem & Moeller, 2025).

Focusing specifically on systemic violence related to drug markets, Reuter (2009) distinguishes between two main types of violence associated with the distribution of drugs: competitive and internal violence[1] (see also, Reuter, 2016). In that regard, competitive *inter-group* violence refers to disputes among rival dealers, whereas internal *intra-group* violence refers to the violence that may occur inside criminal organisations, either when lower-level agents assault those higher in the hierarchy in order to secure upward mobility, but perhaps more commonly, when higher-level members use threats and violence in order to secure compliance and retention of lower-level members. While Goldstein's (1985) original account of 'systemic violence' included this type of internal violence within dealing hierarchies, Reuter (2009) has argued that the "most attention has been given to violence generated by competition among sellers", whereas "less attention has been given to violence within selling organizations" (p. 276), even though as Reuter also notes, the older literature in the field did report on this.

Internal violence, in the form of criminal exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults, has received substantial attention in the UK in recent years. While children and vulnerable adults have always been involved in 'running' drugs in local markets (Lupton et al., 2002), the widespread and targeted exploitation of these in County Lines has become a defining hallmark of this drug distribution model (NPCC, 2024). There has been a marked focus on how criminal groups utilise the labour of young people for transporting and selling drugs in distant localities. Furthermore, a practice known as 'cuckooing'[2], which involves criminal groups taking over the homes of vulnerable adults in order to store and sell drugs from their property, has gained increased attention (Moyle, 2019; Spicer et al., 2020; Bainbridge et al., 2025).

People who are recruited into County Lines drug dealing largely come from backgrounds of great economic deprivation and adversity. They may be coerced through threats of violence from the beginning, but perhaps more often, they will initially participate willingly, being attracted by profit, access to drugs, and/or the excitement and status of being associated with particular individuals selling drugs: part of a 'gang' or 'organised crime group' (Robinson et al., 2019). They may also be 'groomed' in their recruitment through psychological coercion and manipulation, or they may be entrapped by accumulation of drug debts that they are offered to pay off by selling, storing or transporting drugs (Windle et al., 2020). However, whatever the method of their initial recruitment, they may find it exceedingly difficult to leave later, and may be subjected to violence, or threats thereof, in order to ensure compliance and that they keep working for the line (Maxwell, 2024).

Conceptualising violence in drug markets

As noted above, the focus of much of the literature to date on DMRV has been on physical violence committed by drug market actors either against rivals, or less commonly, those working for them. This is not surprising, since, as De Haan (2008) notes "one of the most common ways of defining violence is to only consider forms of criminal violence and to argue that violence is the use of force that has been prohibited by law" (p. 27). However, feminist analyses of violence against women have been important in challenging the tendency to focus solely on what is defined, reported and recognised in practice as criminal violence and have prompted researchers "to think more creatively across all forms of violence" (Stanko, 2006, p. 544). This includes thinking beyond criminal violence between strangers happening 'on the street', to include forms of psychological violence and coercive control happening within the home (Stanko, 1994).

Another form of less-frequently recognised violence is state

[1] And these are the definitions adopted in this article.

[2] Harding (2020) defines cuckooing as "a form of criminal exploitation where vulnerable people are conned, coerced, controlled, or intimidated into sharing, providing, or offering up their accommodation to criminals (often drug dealers), who then use it to base their criminal activity (often drug dealing)" (p. 179). Cuckooing is a cheap and convenient way for out-of-town County Lines dealers to establish a base for operations in a new locality and has been closely connected to this drug distribution model (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). The emergence of cuckooing has been understood in terms of an evolution of 'crack houses', another term used to describe residential spaces used for drug-related purposes. The introduction of 'crack house closure orders' in the UK may have created a pressure for using properties for drug-related purposes in more discreet and less noticeable ways (Loughery, 2025).

sanctioned violence, which is often legitimised through labelling the victim as 'violent' and 'dangerous', and which is apparent especially in the US, but also elsewhere, where "black and brown people on the street or in their homes [are] called or deemed 'violent' by police who arrest them or gun them down, even when they are unarmed, even when they are walking or running away" (Butler, 2020, p. 3). Thus, if we only focus on criminal violence, and not the violence perpetrated by the state, we embrace a "tacit assumption that the law's violence (the use of legitimate violence by the state) is not as problematical and subject to scrutiny as the use of violence by individuals" (Stanko, 1994, p. 33)

Given the contested nature of what 'counts' as violence, De Haan (2008) argues that "locating violence empirically is not a neutral undertaking, solely dependent on what is 'out there' to be found" and thus one should "consider the costs and benefits involved in holding a particular view on violence" and how such a view may enable or constrain one "to 'see further and deeper' into [the] material" (p. 37). Similarly, Stanko (2005) argues that conceptions of violence link with action towards reducing it and that "it is only through fluidity of definition that we can think creatively about disrupting violence as a social phenomenon" (p. 3). Based on this, for the purpose of this study, we also include forms of police use of force that may be legal but nonetheless experienced as violence by those subjected to it. We argue that the violence connected to drug law enforcement could be termed 'enforcement-related violence', encompassing those harms that may stem from the inherently violent (legally sanctioned or not) activities of forcibly stopping, searching, restraining, detaining, hitting, tasing, and shooting people associated with the illegal drug market.

Harm reduction policing and violence

As our study also concerns responses aimed at reducing violence in drug markets, including those which relate to police enforcement, we draw on recent literature focusing on applying the concept of 'harm reduction' to the policing and law enforcement context (Stevens, 2013; Beckett, 2016; Kammersgaard, 2019; Bacon, 2022, 2024; Coomber et al., 2022; Perrone et al., 2022). While 'harm reduction' has been applied to the health harms connected to drug use since the mid 1980s, spurred by the need for effective strategies to reduce the risk of HIV transmission among people injecting drugs, it has been argued that this line of thinking also could be applied usefully to the policing of drugs, not least to the policing of drug markets (Bacon & Spicer, 2023).

Traditionally, policing has focused on reducing the *supply* of controlled substances, whereas a focus on harm reduction switches the emphasis to reducing the *harms* associated with the production, transport, distribution and control of illicit drugs, without necessarily reducing the amounts of drugs being supplied or consumed. This could entail targeting particularly violent and harmful forms of activities associated with drug distribution, rather than focussing on reducing or eliminating the market itself (Caulkins & Reuter, 2009). Recognising this decades ago, Dorn and South (1990) wrote: "given that we cannot totally prevent illegal drug markets … what sort of markets do we least dislike, and how can we adjust the control mix so as to push markets in the least undesired direction" (p.186). This approach recognises that markets generally have proved to be extremely resilient to enforcement efforts aimed at reducing supply (Bacon & Spicer, 2023). The police can at best take specific dealers out of the market, but these are quickly replaced, and frequently this is associated with increased levels of violence before the market settles (Werb, 2011; Moeller & Hesse, 2013).

This reflects not only the potential ineffectiveness of drug law enforcement, but also the unintended consequences that may accompany it. In their exploration of the utility of the harm reduction concept for drugs policing, Bacon and Spicer (2023) notably point to the importance of considering the harms stemming from drug law enforcement itself. The harm that drug law enforcement has caused especially Black and ethnic minority communities in the name of the 'War on Drugs' is difficult to overstate (Cooper, 2015; Shiner et al., 2018). Furthermore, the negative effects of police contact and enforcement for the mental and physical health of those at the receiving end, alerts us to the general 'costs' associated with enforcement activities (Geller et al., 2014; DeVylder et al., 2022).

In the following, we will first present our findings on different forms of violence associated with County Lines drug markets in the UK and policing responses to these, based on a national, two-year research project focusing on the policing of County Lines. Drawing on these findings, we will argue for the need to situate internal as well as enforcement-related violence as central parts of DMRV, and for the need to further develop harm reduction policing thinking and responses to effectively counteract these forms of violence.

Methods

Given our aim to assess how DMRV is experienced and responded to within County Lines, and given the hidden nature of much of this violence, it was important to draw on a number of research methods that could elicit rich information about this sensitive topic. A combination of qualitative interviews with police officers and people with lived experience, and ethnographic observation, enabled us to address this aim. Our interest was in how those interviewed and observed understood and responded to DMRV, and thereby the meaning participants attached to their experiences of DMRV. Our approach therefore fitted within an interpretivist paradigm (e.g. Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

The data are drawn from a national study of County Lines and associated policing responses in the UK. The overall aim of this study was to investigate perceptions of the extent and nature of County Lines and associated exploitation practices across police forces in the country, as well as information about policing responses to this. Further, the study aimed to focus on a number of cities/areas in order to gain further insights by interviewing front-line officers, staff working in NGOs and statutory services, and people with lived experiences of County Lines. This research design was chosen as it provided an opportunity to gain a broad overview and understanding of the issue across the country, which informed a deep dive into three specific localities.

Phase 1 involved interviews with senior officers across 44 of the 45 UK territorial police forces and the British Transport Police. The recruitment was targeted, and we aimed at recruiting 'force leads' on either County Lines or Criminal Exploitation in each force. Only one force did not reply to our multiple interview requests. The interviewed officers were at the management level, including Sergeants, Inspectors, Chief Inspectors and Superintendents, with the majority being of Inspector and Chief Inspector rank. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide covering questions about the organisation of the drug market in their locality; violence and conflict in the drug market; criminal exploitation in the drug market; and police responses to exploitation and violence. The interview guide was informed by previous research in the area, including research carried out by members of the research team, and interviewees were also able to raise their own topics. The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and were audio-recorded for transcription[3]. The interviews lasted around one hour. In total, 50 officers were interviewed for Phase 1, reflecting how, particularly in the larger forces, additional interviews were undertaken with officers covering different aspects of the policing of County Lines drug market activity, as one single officer could not provide information across the different elements that the interview aimed to cover.

Phase 2 involved rapid appraisals of three selected cities/police force areas. The areas are anonymised in our findings but cover both the North and the South of England. Researchers travelled to each location and conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with: police officers (26);

[3] At the request of participants, one interview was not recorded, and another was recorded but not transcribed, in those cases notes were taken instead.

statutory agencies and NGOs (15), and with people with lived experience (PWLE) of exploitation, including cuckooing, in the context of drug markets, (17). As for Phase 1, these interviews followed interview guides detailing different topics and questions for each of the three groups (police, statutory services/NGO, and PWLE), but also with the potential for participants to raise their own topics. These interview guides were informed by previous research, as well as topics/themes raised in Phase 1 which called for further investigation and exploration. Interviews for the second phase were mostly conducted face-to-face during single, intensive fieldwork weeks in each area. Similarly to Phase 1, most interviews lasted around one hour, with some shorter and some longer. Researchers also observed partnership safeguarding meetings and did three days of participant observation with officers on duty through 'ride-alongs' and 'walk-alongs'. Specifically, researchers undertook observations of 1) a dedicated team targeting County Lines supply activities, patrolling in unmarked cars and plain clothes, 2) a narcotics detection dog patrol on foot, and 3) regular response units, patrolling in marked cars. The researchers took fieldnotes in situ and produced more comprehensive notes on their observations after they had been conducted. An additional 9 interviews were conducted with national stakeholders across the two phases, bringing the total number of interviews to 117. The whole research team (all authors) were involved in conducting these interviews. A small number of interviews were conducted by a research assistant.

All interviews were transcribed and then coded thematically in NVivo by two researchers (first author and third author). Coding involved a combination of more structured, deductive coding for themes connected to the objectives of the study and inductive coding where themes emerged from the data and were identified and developed collaboratively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A deductive coding structure was initially developed based on the interview guide for Phase 1. In order to review the coding structure, two researchers coded the same three interviews and compared their coding. Based on this, new codes were added, and the meaning of existing codes were discussed and agreed upon between the two researchers. The coding structure was iteratively developed further as more interviews were analysed and new themes emerged from the data. The interview transcripts from Phase 2 were reviewed by the researchers in the same way as for Phase 1, and an enhanced and more comprehensive coding structure was developed to address the themes from additional stakeholders from statutory and voluntary services and PWLE. Several key themes were identified, but the ones most relevant to this paper related to PWLE encounters with different forms of violence, exploitation and enforcement in the context of County Lines, as well as police officer perspectives on different forms of violence and exploitation in County Lines drug markets, and their responses to this. It should be noted that only a minority of the PWLE sample talked about their experiences of DMRV, which may reflect the sensitive nature of the topic, as well as the previous finding that many drug markets are largely free of violence most of the time, (Coomber, 2015, 2025; Johnson, 2016).

The team had two meetings with an advisory group of police representatives, NGOs and academic experts on County Lines. Furthermore, with the help of the NGO, Revolving Doors, two meetings were organised with a group of County Lines experts by experience, who advised us on the focus, methods and analysis of findings. The research was conducted with ethical approval from the University of York, with the protection and safety of PWLE as the highest priority. Recruitment of PWLE happened through NGOs or other agencies who were in contact with the target group, and care was taken to inform participants and ensure that consent was voluntary and informed. We acknowledge the power differentials between the participants and gatekeepers; with this in mind, every effort was made to emphasise the voluntary nature of participation. Names are pseudonyms and potentially identifying details of people and localities have been changed.

Findings

In the following, we will describe the findings of our study on County Lines in the UK, that relate to the violence associated with this particular drug distribution model, and how it is policed. We will first describe a form of internal violence that has become particularly associated with County Lines, namely the threats, coercion and violence connected to the exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults for transporting, storing or selling illicit drugs for County Lines operatives. After this we consider enforcement-related violence as an important, but rarely acknowledged, form of harm and violence that comes with the illicit drug trade, before we consider police responses to County Lines, and explore harm reduction perspectives on the policing of drug markets. Finally, we will, briefly, consider competitive inter-group violence in County Lines drug markets.

Internal violence and exploitation

In the UK there has been increased attention on how County Lines groups are utilising and exploiting young people and vulnerable adults in recent years, and these are increasingly recognised as victims of exploitation (Marshall et al., 2023). In that regard, some officers even equated County Lines specifically with exploitation: *"I break it down and say, it is drug dealing with exploitation. That's what County Lines is"* (Inspector, Police force #3). This exploitation could take different forms, from 'grooming', and manipulation, to threats and actual physical violence. Findings suggest that the latter operates as a disciplinary tool within County Lines operations, where it is used as a means of recruiting and retaining 'workers'. For instance, a young person, that we interviewed, Ollie, described being forced to start dealing when he was only 14 years old:

> *[my dad's friend] asked me if I'd go and drop a few things off for him and bring the money back to him. At first I was a bit wary of what I was taking and what I was bringing back, but he was just like, whatever you do, don't look in the bag, just take it there and just bring the other bag back with you. So at first I said no, and he was like, 'I need you to do it for me because if you don't, then you'll end up getting hurt.'* (Ollie)

He was later asked to transport a bag out of town and was again told not to look in the bag. When he looked, he found a firearm and a large quantity of crack cocaine and heroin that he was to exchange for £50,000 cash. When he returned, he was told that he had to work every single day until he forgot what was in the bag. Reflecting on how he felt at the time, Ollie said:

> *… that made me a bit sceptical and a bit scared at the time, but I was like, also thinking, if I don't do this, what's going to happen to me and my family* […] *it could be today that I end up dead or the next day, or any minute of my life I could end up dead from this person […] then having people come to my mum's door, threatening my mum or going to my auntie's, threatening my auntie, and I'm like, I can't really live this life if I've got people going to my family's houses, threatening them, because of me* (Ollie)

This illustrates how people involved in drug markets may be coerced into recruitment, and, perhaps more commonly, be coerced and threatened to keep working for the gang or the 'line'. Furthermore, it illustrates how threats and violence may be directed at family members in order to ensure compliance and that 'debts' are paid. Similarly, one of the interviewed officers spoke about how parents and other family members would sometimes be held accountable for 'drug debts', and may be threatened into compliance through various 'scare tactics':

> *Windows get smashed all the time; cars get wrecked. They put lighter fluid through your letterbox and set it on fire […] the guy I was saying about before, he had petrol bombs thrown at his mum's garage door […] I've seen*

it where brothers have had to take on the debt, because another brother's hung himself in the garden (Front-line local policing, Police force #3)

A woman we interviewed, Rebecca, in her late 40s, was assaulted two weeks after her son was arrested by the police for possession of weapons and drugs:

I got followed and mugged. They battered me with a hammer, they broke me eye socket, me nose, me jaw, two teeth out, and a bleed on the brain (Rebecca)

She was unsure about whether this was related to her son's arrest or not:

Was he involved with higher people? Is this what they do to the families, to make sure that they don't talk? I can't say for sure […] when I talk about it, I think to myself, there's a possibility it could be related. You just don't know. (Rebecca)

Victims of cuckooing likewise talked about being coerced into drug dealing through threats of violence. Tom was in his late 40s, had had used heroin for 20 years, and had experienced cuckooing three times in the past few years:

The first time was horrific. I don't know about County Lines, but it was lads not from round here [...] They became aware of me, and then one day it was like, 'Oh we're going to come and start up down here" [...] just saying, 'Oh yes, we'll sort you out,' [giving him drugs] and they start off first couple of days, yes they do look after you, and then gradually over time it's just less, and less, and less, and you just can't get rid of them because you end up owing them money, because they give you tick [buy drugs on credit] (Tom)

This illustrates how the cuckooing might at first take place through a perceived mutually beneficial agreement, but then he started owing the occupiers and could not get rid of them in the end. Reflecting on the physical violence and threats associated with this, Tom said:

… they're all kids. They're like 16, 17, but there's loads of them, and they've got backup, and you just can't do anything. I've had a machete in my head. I've lost count of how many fucking hidings [beatings] I've had [...] I've had my jaw broken twice. I've been stabbed in the leg. They don't give a fuck. (Tom)

This, again, illustrates how compliance may be ensured through both threats and actual violence directed at people who are not from rival groups, but who are recruited and made to work for the group or dealer in various ways, either for transporting or selling drugs, or for their properties that are used as bases for storing and selling from.

Enforcement-related violence

During our ride-alongs with drug detectives focusing on disrupting County Lines drug markets, we witnessed how drug law enforcement itself could be said to constitute a particular form of DMRV:

The interior was shabby and the house smelt. At the top we came to a door that had been broken in (on a previous police raid I was later told) and found two occupants being dealt with by Gregg [one of the officers that we were accompanying] and another two officers. One of the two suspects appeared to be having difficulty speaking English (it later transpired that he was from [European country]) and Gregg and another officer were shouting at him to spit the drugs out. They got him on the ground and slapped him as he cried out. Gregg shouted 'spit it out you stupid cunt' and then he punched him (with limited force). He cried out more loudly. Eventually he spat out the drugs and an officer later came out of the flat to show [co-researcher] and me a quite large bag of crack crystals or 'rocks'. The man started to cry and the officers became more gentle with him. [Field notes from observations with dedicated team targeting County Lines]

As this field note illustrates, drug law enforcement may very well involve the use of force, and indeed violence, even if it is legally sanctioned. Tom, who told about his experiences of being cuckooed in the previous section and the threats and violence associated with this, also shared experiences of violence related directly to policing, including the police searching his mouth cavity for drugs, which he experienced as being choked:

Two people dived out of it, ran, and pinned me up against the van by my throat […] I'm going, 'You're choking me,' to him. He's like, 'Spit it out.' I'm like, 'Spit what out, my teeth.' 'You've got something in your mouth.' I was like, 'I haven't, I just happen to be really fucking high.' He just choked me. So they eventually realised that I didn't have anything in my mouth. (Tom)

In 2017, following incidents with officers trying to prevent suspects from swallowing drugs in London, which led to the deaths of two young men due to blocked airways, the Metropolitan Police changed the guidance they give to officers to refrain from preventing people from swallowing drugs once the wraps are already in the mouth, given the risk associated with this (Daly, 2017). As our observations and interviews illustrate, this, however, still seems to be a widespread practice in at least this police force. Further reflecting on how police treated him and other people using drugs more generally, Tom said that:

They're not bothered. If it suits them, they'll kick the fuck out of me. They're not bothered. If they think it'll get them what they want they'll batter me. They have done my brother, and they have done my mates, loads of them, and it just happens [...] Or like the [proactive drug team], for example. That's just like a fucking boys club. Get nicked by them and you've fucking had it [...] They're generally worse than other coppers [...] it's just a gang of gobshites, but they will kick the fuck out of you, and do on a regular basis (Tom)

This demonstrates how Tom felt that officers generally, and specifically the proactive team targeting drug dealing, were treating him, and people like him, with impunity and how he related drug law enforcement very closely to violence. Furthermore, his use of terms like 'they will kick the fuck out of you' and 'batter you', mirrored to some extent how he spoke about the violence that he also experienced at the hands of the County Lines groups occupying his home.

A similar experience was related to us by Liz, a woman in her early 50s who used to take heroin and crack cocaine and was shoplifting to fund her habit. She reflected on an arrest for an outstanding shoplifting charge from when she had just started using heroin back in the mid-1990s. She was taking her daughter to school when she was about five or six years old.

[The officers] are like driving alongside me and they're saying, 'Come on, there's a warrant out for your arrest.' I said, 'Can you just let me take my little girl to school please, and then I'll come with yous, gladly.' 'No, you're not. You're doing it now.' [...] They've got out the car, they grabbed hold of me, yes. I've got [my daughter] with me. She's crying now, the little girl, she's hysterical. They grabbed me, and I'm trying to resist arrest because they trying to put handcuffs [starts crying] sorry (Liz)

Further, she explained the arrest:

Putting handcuffs on me in front of everybody. So I've headbutted, put my head back and headbutted the policewoman. They battered me, like dragged me in the car […] the one in the passenger seat has grabbed my hair […] and is repeatedly punching me in the head […] He's saying, 'You're scum. I should just throw you in the [river] now. No one will ever miss you. No one will know. You're just a scrounger off the dole.' [someone perceived to misuse the welfare system] [...] They were horrible bastards. Horrible. Sometimes they are horrible. They treat you like you're dirt (Liz)

While this incident was a long time ago and not directly related to drug law enforcement, it still illustrates how enforcement-related

violence can have lasting effects, given the significance that Liz attached to this episode. This illustrates how "violence is not only experienced in the moment but extends in time" (Henze-Pedersen, 2025, p. 3)

Taken together, these accounts and examples all illustrate how drug law enforcement is linked to violent encounters between officers and perpetrators, constituting a source of DMRV that should be considered in its own right. The force used in some of these examples may be within the parameters of lawful use of police force while the use of force may seem more objectionable in others. However, these encounters were all clearly experienced as violent and upsetting by those we interviewed. The point here is not to delineate between legitimate and illegitimate use of police force, but rather that such violent incidents should be taken into account if one wishes to consider the totality of violence associated with drug markets.

Harm reduction and drug market-related violence

Several of the interviewed officers spoke about the overall strategic approach they took to policing County Lines in their force, with the ultimate aim of closing them down[4]. However, some officers seemed to take on a perspective akin to that which has been described as 'harm reduction policing' in the literature (Bacon & Spicer, 2023), recognising that reducing supply was incredibly difficult, while reducing the harms associated with it might be more feasible:

> *… the drugs are never, ever going to stop. You're never going to stop that, but you can actually do something about the children, and the vulnerability* (Retired Police Officer, Force lead for County Lines, Police force #4)

Similarly, another officer spoke about how their main goal was to deter County Lines groups from recruiting and exploiting young people and children, not necessarily to stop drug supply altogether:

> *We will never stop drug supply; but what our aim in [police force] is to take the vulnerability out of drug dealing. That is our vision. So we want gangs, if they want to deal drugs, you go and deal the drugs, but you do it yourself, like the old school way back in the 90s […] they did their own dealing, they didn't use kids, they didn't use vulnerable adults. So that's the vision is, yes, we're not going to stop drug supply, but let's take out the vulnerability* (Inspector, Role focussed on county lines, Police force #3)

Targeted drug law enforcement has been reported in other contexts, such as in Copenhagen where the local police selectively targeted dealers around the drug consumption rooms that were known to use violence against users, while letting the 'peaceful' dealers be. This was based on a careful approach focused on not disrupting the market when it functioned peacefully and recognising the inevitability of drugs in this social context (Kammersgaard, 2019). Similarly, the so-called 'Ceasefire' approach in the US has been used to target those who used violence in drug markets specifically by "marking violence and overt drug dealing as behaviours that were sure to bring an immediate and harsh law enforcement response", with the initiative delivering another "clear message: to continue selling drugs, you must avoid violence and stay out of the street" (Curtis & Wendel, 2007, p. 884). While drug markets can reward violence, either when used competitively to protect or gain market shares, or when used internally as a disciplinary tactic, these examples represent attempts to turn that dynamic around and incentivise more peaceful dealing practices through strategic forms of intervention that aim to 'train the drug market' (Curtis & Wendel, 2007).

Another officer also explained how a similar sentiment translated into a tool that they used to score the different lines according to the harm they inflicted on the community. This was used to decide on which ones to prioritise in enforcement efforts, as well as trying to reduce the 'harm score' of those respective lines, i.e. deter them from using violence and exploiting vulnerable people:

> *… the drugs cause one issue, addiction, spiralling life, fuelling other criminality, but a bigger issue for me is the violence that comes with, and the weapon-carrying and things like that. So for me, a success is the reduction in harm score.* (Detective Chief Inspector, Force lead for County Lines, Police force #5)

This may go some way in providing an alternative metric through which to evaluate drugs policing efforts. Rather than focusing on 'closing down' lines and reducing the supply of drugs by focusing on the number of drugs seized and dealers arrested, such a focus on the harms connected to drug markets, not least the "violence that comes with it", could potentially help shift the focus of drugs policing to more meaningful and realistic objectives (Bacon & Spicer, 2023).

Competitive violence

As with many drug markets a certain level of competitive violence was reported as present by the police in the interviews we conducted. Our findings in this particular area largely concur with those found in previous research on drug markets: a range of violence from threats to murder was relayed to us, often driven by urban organised crime groups and often (although by no means always) involving competition for the trade. However, whilst the degree and level of competitive violence varied across spaces, it is difficult to say anything substantial about this based on police interviews alone, and it would require more detailed analysis of the individual drug markets in question to make sense of this. Furthermore, while the presence and nature of competitive violence is relatively well covered in the drug field literature (Moeller & Hesse, 2013; Jacques & Allen, 2015; Reuter, 2016), the primary focus of this paper has been to relate new aspects of DMRV rarely reported on but which is evident in County Lines drug supply and its policing.

Discussion

In this paper, we have sought to build on the extant literature on DMRV. In doing this, we have focused on a particular type of drug market, namely County Lines drug markets in the UK, and have considered the different perspectives on, experiences with and responses to DMRV in this context. While there is an increasing focus in the literature on firearms and shootings in European drug markets (Gerell et al., 2021; De Schutter & Duquet, 2023), the day-to-day internal violence associated with drug markets has received comparatively little attention. This article therefore makes a substantial contribution in terms of its focus on the internal violence, and threats of violence, within drug markets. There is also a sizable literature on the negative impact of drug market disruption, including crackdowns (Moeller & Hesse, 2013; Coomber et al., 2022; Werb et al., 2011) and evidence from many countries around the world such as North America, Mexico, Thailand, the Philippines, Russia, Ukraine and Nigeria, of the violent policing and extortion of drug users, often inflicted in the context of these 'crackdowns' (Cooper et al., 2004; Friedman et al., 2021; Park et al., 2019; Nelson & Brown, 2019; Miller et al., 2008; Kutsa et al., 2016; Landsberg et al., 2016; Hayashi et al., 2013; Sarang et al., 2010; Gaines et al., 2015; Jensen & Hapal, 2018). However, research on these issues in Europe remains very limited. Our study therefore also offers rare insights on

[4] The UK Home Office targets are set for all forces in receipt of funding to support County Lines operations. Through the Home Office County Lines programme £145 million of additional funding has been dedicated to Taskforces in the four exporter forces: the Metropolitan Police, Merseyside, West Midlands and Greater Manchester Police, to work with importer forces, British Transport Police and the National County Lines Coordination Centre to close down at least 2,000 lines (and preferably more) as set out in the national 10-year drug strategy (NCLCC & NPCC, 2024). Clearly such targets drive forces towards closure of any line, whatever the level of violence or other harms associated with it.

enforcement-related violence in the context of UK drug markets.

The exploitation of young people and vulnerable adults was consistently highlighted as a prominent feature of County Lines. In that regard, our findings point to the importance of focusing not only on competitive violence in drug markets, but situating violence and threats directed at vulnerable people involved in drug markets as a central part of DMRV, even though it may be less visible and less high profile than gang-related shootings and homicides. Furthermore, while this type of violence may include physical and bodily harm, or threats thereof, it may importantly also include forms of psychological violence, coercion and manipulation. However, in pointing towards this type of violence, we do not wish to depict those who fall victim to it as either powerless or lacking resourcefulness. The recruitment of both young people and vulnerable adults is often depicted as one of unequivocal exploitation, grooming and/or coercion, but research has pointed to how these individuals' own lived experience may fit better with the idea of 'constrained choice' with their involvement being a response to multiple and complex experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation and deprivation (Moyle, 2019; Marshall, 2024). Nevertheless, our findings illustrate how threats, coercion and violence, while by no means an inevitable component of drug markets in itself, indeed still were a grim reality for some of the people that we interviewed.

Our findings also suggest that enforcement-related violence itself should be considered a part of DMRV, given the potentially violent conflicts between the police and people involved in drug markets. Notwithstanding the potential defensibility of such enforcement practices, in the name of cutting supply, increasing public safety, protecting drug users who could overdose if drugs are swallowed or reducing other forms of DMRV, we argue that analytically this should be considered a part of DMRV to balance the potential gains from enforcement with the harms that it can produce. Research evidence has increasingly pointed out how police stops and criminal justice contact in general, even without the use of overt force and violence, have far greater consequences for mental health than previously considered, and that structural disadvantages can amplify this (Geller et al., 2014; Sugie et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2019). To address the harms associated with DMRV, drug policy researchers need to recognise all the forms these can take, including the harms connected to drug law enforcement. This, we argue, is a necessary first step in an approach whereby drug markets are pushed towards their least undesirable and least violent forms. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that much drug market activity is in fact peaceful despite media, policy and research depictions to the contrary (Coomber, 2015). The strong association between drugs and violence in the public mind may itself legitimise the mobilisation of law enforcement and state violence to crack down on 'dangerous' market actors (Butler, 2020). Recognising how drug law enforcement itself is linked to violence, may enable us to better acknowledge all of the harms stemming from both the market itself and the control thereof.

In that regard, our findings also point to emergent harm reduction policing responses to drug market activity, with some officers highlighting how their approach focused on reducing the exploitation and violence associated with drug markets, rather than on reducing supply itself. This focus on reducing the harms associated with drug markets could potentially help reorient drug law enforcement towards more practicable and productive goals (Bacon & Spicer, 2023). However, with the continued emphasis put on "breaking supply chains" in the UK drug strategy, shifting towards such harm reduction goals and measures more fully and at the national level may still prove difficult politically (Bacon & Spicer, 2022). Considering the harms stemming from drug law enforcement itself, there has been some progress towards recognising young people and vulnerable adults who become involved in drug markets, and who are often the ones at the receiving end of the internal violence associated with these, as victims of exploitation rather than as perpetrators and accomplices in drug dealing. This may bear some potential for mitigating some of the harms associated with drug law enforcement and the criminal justice system itself. However, these individuals have only recently 'emerged' as victims in the drugs policing field (Marshall et al., 2024, Coomber, 2025), and their victim identification continues to be complicated by the fact that they rarely fit with officer expectations of how a 'real' victim should look and behave like, and because they may not recognise themselves as victims of exploitation (Espeute & Lanskey, 2023; Shaw, 2023; Marshall, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

While this study has provided a valuable window into DMRV in the context of County Lines in the UK, it also had limitations in terms of focus and sample size, and further research in this area is warranted. Specifically, we would suggest additional research involving PWLE to garner additional experiences of these forms of often hidden violence in drug markets. Furthermore, research aimed specifically at developing and evaluating new forms of harm reduction policing targeting violence in drug markets would be beneficial. This study was explorative in nature, and has pointed towards some of these aspects, but more research is needed to better uncover the nature and extent of DMRV, as well as how best to respond to it. Overall, our findings point to how violence associated with drug markets can take many different forms, and we would argue that it is important to broaden our view to consider all of these. If we focus too narrowly on competitive violence in drug markets, we end up obscuring many of the experiences that people involved in drug markets themselves define as violent (Stanko, 1994). How we define violence, and what we include in its definition, importantly shapes how we can respond to it (Stanko, 2005). In that regard, defining violence in drug markets is not merely a conceptual exercise, it is a necessary first step toward effectively addressing the multiple harms associated with these.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tobias Kammersgaard: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Charlie Lloyd:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Chris Devany:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Laura Bainbridge:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Kate Brown:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition. **Ross Coomber:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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- Ross Coomber (RC) is a member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Drug Policy. Given his role as Editorial Board member, RC had no involvement in the peer review of this article and had no access to information regarding its peer review. Full responsibility for the editorial process for this article was delegated to another journal editor.

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-If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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